Workers' power

An interview with Neel of the Labor Party

Ethan Cole

On June 11, 2025, Platypus Affiliated Society member Ethan Cole interviewed Neel, the National Mobilizing Secretary and the South Carolina Party Chair of the Labor Party, which was founded in the United States in 2024.[1] *An edited transcript follows.*

Ethan Cole: What radicalized you?

Neel: I was a Trump supporter in 2016. I voted for him and supported him vehemently. I was a kid at the Citadel Military College of South Carolina at the time, so it was kind of expected that if you were born and raised in the South and went to the Citadel, you were Republican. It was rare not to be. After not long with his presidency, I thought I had made a mistake, and I started to read political theory. I went on the libertarian and small-government train for a little while. The more educated I got, the more Left I became.

EC: What turned you away from small-government libertarianism?

N: The main shift came when I read a brief summary of *Capital* (1867). Someone told me I couldn't read *Capital* — it's too much to read — but there are good YouTube videos that do a deep dive. I wouldn't say someone radicalized me, but that, along with some adjacent works. I was an economics major; I was looking at the market and how free-market capitalism has failed at this point — we are fully in late-stage capitalism — and I had to grapple with that and realize the market was not doing what it should be doing according to conservative economics. It's not doing what it's supposed to do in terms of small government. Understanding that these two things were wrong was the first big hurdle. Then I started thinking about the social side. Libertarians are good at letting people live and exist as they want, but they're generally opposed to government protections. That was an issue for me. You can say everyone should live how they want, but are you going to protect their right to live as they want? They didn't have an answer for that. Also, a massive deconstruction of my faith was a big factor; I was raised a fundamental Baptist. All of that came together in a large climax. I thought, "Bernie's kind of cool; what's he talking about?" But Bernie is socialism-lite; I wouldn't even call him a socialist.

EC: When and why was the Labor Party founded? How did you get involved?

N: It was founded in October 2024 by three members focused on citizen referendums originating in Colorado, with the goal of making citizen-led ballot initiatives a national standard. In South Carolina, you can't petition to say, "This is something to be on the ballot." They don't care. That's how it started — getting the voice of the average citizen more involved in politics, specifically at the state level. It grew as unions bought into the idea, because unions have no buying power right now, compared to corporations, which, through *Citizens United*, have most of the buying power in politics. Our founder looked into the former iteration of the Labor Party from 1996, saw that we tried this before, and wondered what it would look like to try again today. I jumped on board and built the Discord from the ground up. That was where things started because it was the easiest way to funnel people into channels for conversation, debate, and discussion. From there, we brought in good folks who stumbled upon the Party. Now we have policy writers, and we are producing articles and videos on our YouTube channel.[2] In February, we formally filed documents to be recognized as a 527 organization. We're pursuing ballot access in all 50 states — our big initiative right now — and we have it in a few states.

EC: Could you say more about what you learned from the earlier Labor Party, with which Adolph Reed, Jr. was involved?

N: There was a big schism within the former party shortly before its demise. Part of that schism involved willingness to work with the Democratic Party. We don't want to be a party that shows up every four years, runs a candidate, and then walks away. One thing we learned from Moms for Liberty[3] and the Tea Party (2007) was the importance of targeting school boards and county councils — local races where real political change begins. I'm in Dorchester County, South Carolina. When I voted in the 2024 election, I saw that most of the races involved unopposed Republicans, who literally showed up, paid the $100 fee, and were handed a seat. Even if we're in a red state and Republicans are guaranteed to win, I want them to at least have to defend their views on a debate stage and be present. We also learned that federal elections are great, but we have to caucus with Democrats to have any chance. There's no way that we can run a candidate who wins in 2028. So we caucus with the Democrats and endorse some of their candidates. We have a strict endorsement process: candidates must be endorsed by a recognized union before we consider them. We help candidates get in contact with and get endorsed by local unions.

EC: You mentioned caucusing and endorsing Democrats. This strategy dates back to the 1960s with Michael Harrington and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which still upholds it today. What's the Labor Party's relationship with the DSA? What lessons have you learned?

N: We have an amicable and strong working relationship with the DSA. The DSA is not an electoral body; they cannot put a candidate on the ballot but can endorse candidates. Often, we have approached the DSA to offer electoral support by giving them access to the ballot through our endorsement process. So it's more of a local strategy that differs, but almost all our state party chairs work closely with their local DSA organizations. We frame it as not setting up a new table and tell everybody to pull up chairs. We ask for a chair at various tables. I meet people interested in our politics, support them however I can, and when election time comes around, they endorse our candidates.

EC: Is the Labor Party a socialist organization?

N: We have many socialists, but we are not a socialist organization. Socialism cannot exist within the current American political framework. As a political party, we can't be socialist. We have to make concessions somewhere. We're a progressive party — that's the best way to put it. Our 12-point platform borrows language from socialist movements, liberal movements, and the UK Labour Party. We're progressive. We're not anti-socialist; I'd say we're pro-socialist, but we have moderates. It's a big tent.

EC: Your 12-point program references workers' power, language borrowed from socialist movements. Politically and economically, what is workers' power and what does it look like?

N: Workers' power is the bedrock of most of what we do. Our platform is interim; a full platform will take a year of committee work, debate, and National Executive Committee voting. We don't expect much to change — more to be added, less taken away. Some issues are tabled for further discussion. Gun ownership is a big one, and it's very regional. Views in the Southeast differ from those on the West Coast. We've had conversations with the New Black Panther Party, who are pro-gun ownership, just like the former Black Panther Party was. We want to ensure all voices are heard. This isn't an immediate focus. The 12 points are our big non-negotiables and the party's foundation.

Economically, workers' power means ensuring the average American worker — the person who labors for a wage — is represented politically. That means giving unions voting power within our organization. Our National Executive Committee is divided into thirds: one-third is the labor-representative caucus, consisting of elected officials from county council to Congress and hopefully the Presidency; one-third is general party members (where I am), including secretaries and committee chairs; the final third is the Labor Inclusion Organization, which requires union membership or leadership. Giving unions a third of the vote on endorsements and policy decisions is step one — the bare minimum. Beyond that, candidates must be union-endorsed before the Party touches them. In South Carolina, a non-union state, things look different regionally. But the big goal is union representation — not just union presidents giving speeches at conventions but actual union members having voting power and discussions.

A major platform goal is overturning Citizens United. Currently, CEOs and upper management have power — not the workers who make the widgets and profits.

EC: Are there other long-term goals besides electoral?

N: The Labor Party is a 527 organization. Long-term, we aim to run federal candidates. We have a member running for Congress, but we won't run a Presidential candidate in 2028. We may make endorsements. We don't want to show up every four years. The bigger goal is expanding union and cooperative access. The pipe dream is unionizing every workplace — but that's unlikely. Even with a pro-union President, it won't happen everywhere.

Another goal is shifting the political needle Leftward. The Democrats, our Left party, remain Center-moderate — arguably conservative globally. Shifting that needle Left by any means is our political goal. If we endorse a candidate in 2028 who commits to our platform policies, that's a win — even if the Labor Party isn't on the ballot or mentioned. If they enact our policies and uphold our vision of a successful society, we consider that a win. So shifting the political needle Left is our political goal, and unionizing is our economic goal. **|P**

[1] See their website at <https://www.votelabor.org/>.

[2] See <https://www.youtube.com/@LaborPartyYoutube>; see also their TikTok account at <https://www.tiktok.com/@laborpartytiktok>.

[3] Moms for Liberty was founded in 2021.

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Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open

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The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the "Old" (1920s–30s), "New" (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

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The Party did not have a concept of civil society

An interview with Joel Rocamora

Daniel Rudin

On January 13 and 22, 2023, Platypus Affiliated Society member Daniel Rudin interviewed Joel Rocamora, formerly a candidate member of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Rocamora was expelled after raising criticisms that were subsequently published in Breaking Through: The Struggle Within the Communist Party of the Philippines *(1994).*[1] *More recently, he has published* Impossible Is Not So Easy: A Life in Politics *(2019)and* Retrieving the Past: A Memoir *(2024).*[2] *An edited transcript follows.*

Daniel Rudin: How and when did you join the Left and the Communist Party of the Philippines (CCP)?[3]

Joel Rocamora: I had left the Philippines to learn the Indonesian language, before going to Cornell. Upon my return I began teaching at the University of the Philippines. I wanted to join a Leftist group, but people thought it a bad idea to let someone join with an American wife who was probably a CIA agent. I'm told that Joma Sison said this was foolish, and allowed me to join.[4] We put out a journal called Progressive Review. I was jailed for three and a half months after martial law was declared. When I got out, I decided that I might as well do something to deserve getting jailed, so I joined the Party as a candidate member in 1973. In 1975 one of the members of my group got arrested, tortured, and revealed my membership, so I had to go underground. Then I left the country and was deployed by the Party to the West Coast in San Francisco.

DR: What were the main debates in the international cadre community at that time?

JR: In the 1980s in the U.S., the Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino (KDP),[5] was made up of Fil-Ams, Filipinos born and raised in the United States, who had joined the CPP. They were influenced by trends in the Left in the U.S., and they disagreed with the strict Maoist stance of the Party. This coincided with Gorbachev and the changes that he was introducing to the Soviet Union. The KDP created an intellectual journal called Line of March that operated for a few years. Their ambition was to refound the Communist Party of the USA. But they didn't succeed.

DR: Did the developments in the Soviet Union affect what was happening in the Philippines?

JR: Attempts were made to contact elements in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The Chinese hadn't supported the CPP since the 1970s, and there was an effort to break away from the Left part of the Sino-Soviet split.

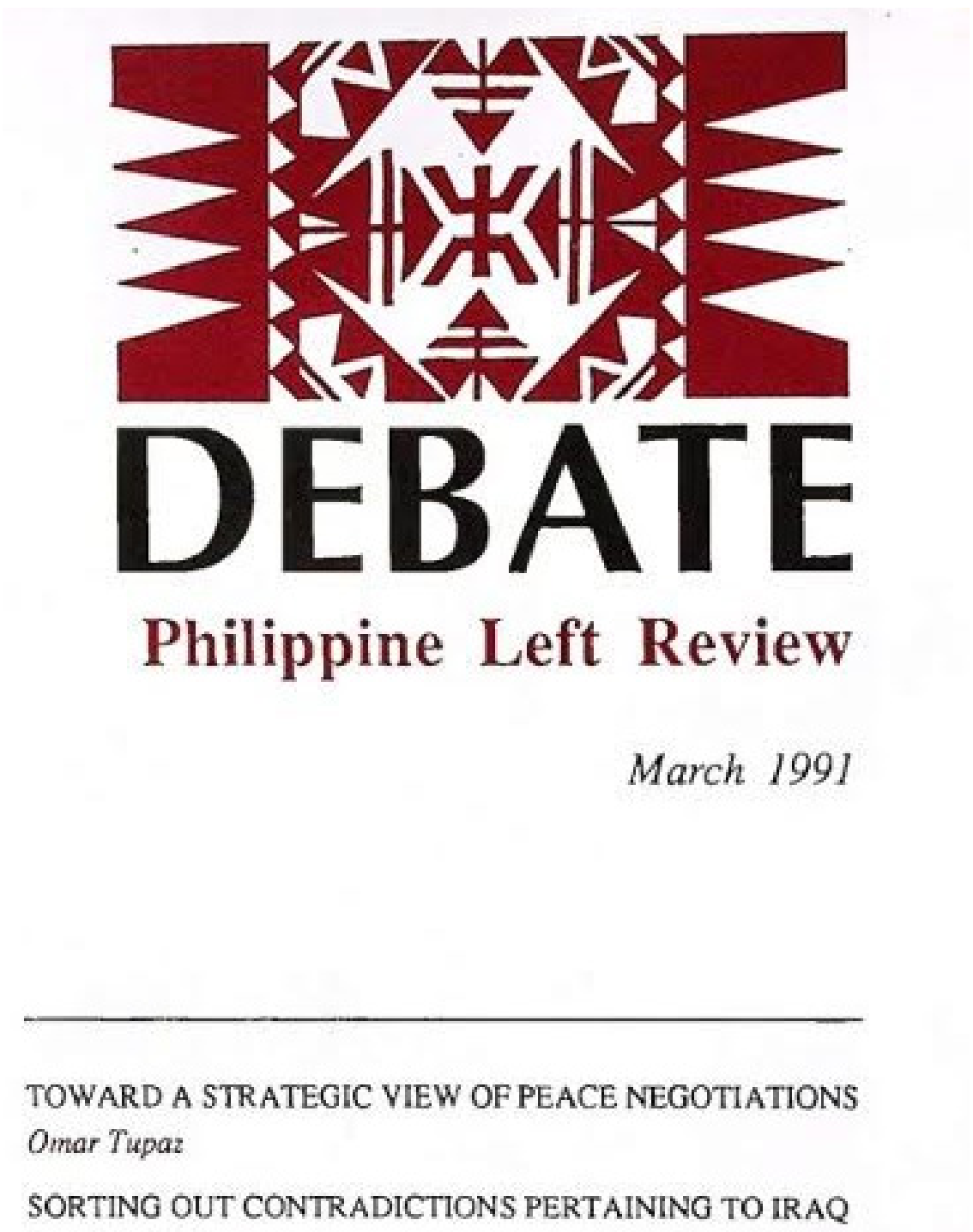
Although I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about the Party's Maoism, I decided to stay. Walden Bello and I created a group called the Philippine Support Committee. In 1986 I was invited to attend a conference in Amsterdam on the Marcos dictatorship. Joma, who was in Holland at that time, encouraged me to stay. It also happened that I fell in love with a Dutch woman and moved to Utrecht in 1987.

I was never made a full member of the Party. I probably hold the record as the longest-standing candidate member who never got promoted. But in Utrecht, that didn't bother people; I was fully part of the organization there called the Central Committee Members Abroad (CCMA). As I recall, I wrote a paper in response to the whole controversy over the founding of the National Democratic Front (NDF). In June 1990 the NDF held its founding congress and the document that it produced was disavowed by the Party. In my paper, I argued for accepting the NDF's statement. Joma arranged discussions with the CCMA regarding my response. I remember it took about six hours to persuade me to move away from some of the conclusions that I had taken.

DR: In your book *Breaking Through: The Struggle Within the Communist Party of the Philippines* (1994) you mention two key figures in the NDF's founding — Nathan Quimpo and Ed Dela Torre — who were supposed to consolidate the various non-party organizations into a united front.

JR: Prior to that, the NDF was really nothing more than a 10-point program. Attempts were made to create mass organizations, but it didn't gel until it held a congress. I think Joma vetoed the NDF congress because at that stage he was fighting a battle with Nathan Quimpo and others, mostly from Mindanao, who were pushing a different strategy. The NDF became a victim of the battle between Joma and the people who supported him, and Nathan Quimpo, who defined the new paradigm and strategy better than anybody else — as a political-military (pol-mil) strategy.[6]

DR: Can you explain further what the pol-mil strategy was? Was Quimpo just copying from the Nicaraguan example?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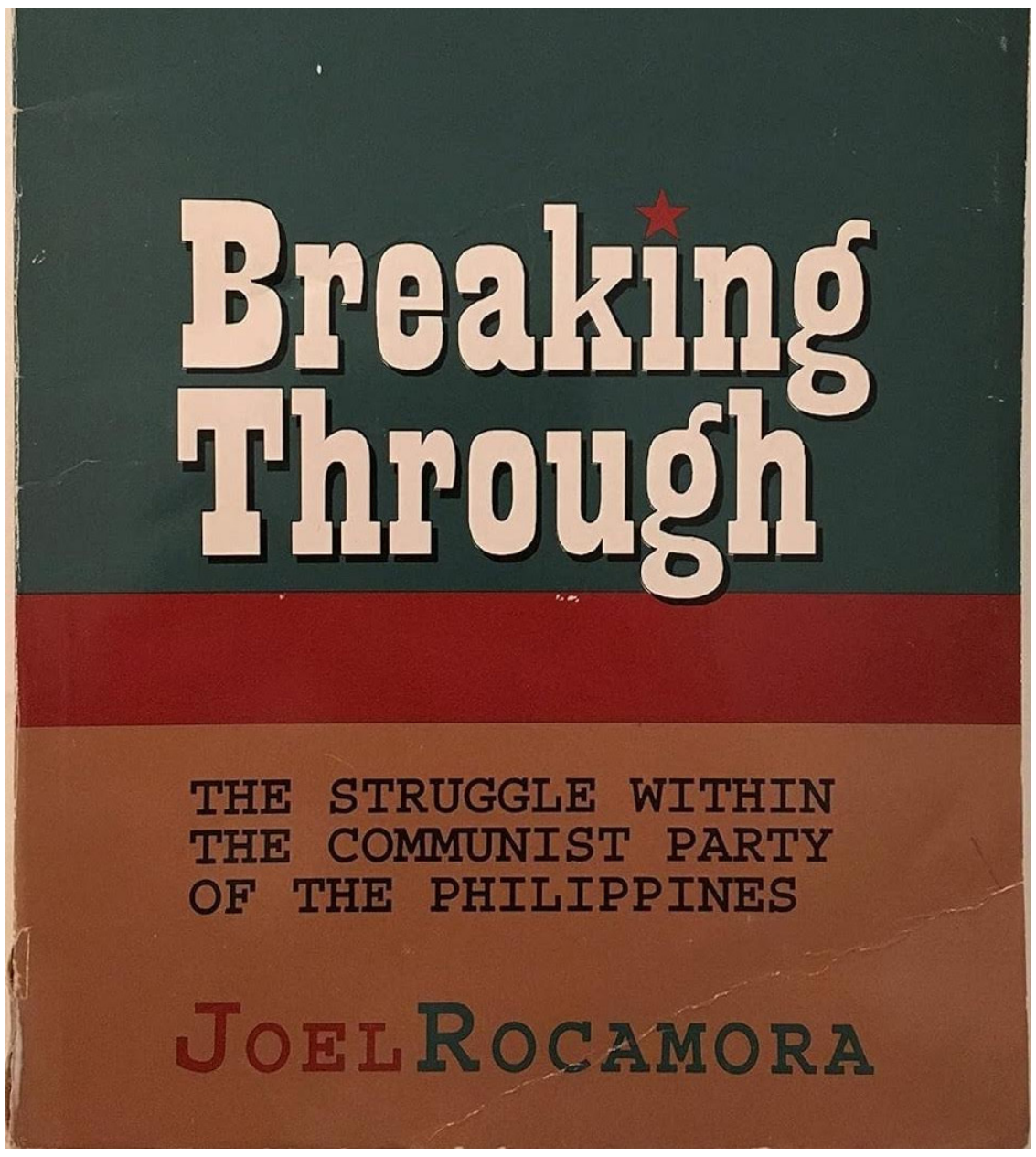


Cover of Rocamora, *Breaking Through* (1994)

JR: Quimpo was saying, pay attention to developments in the Party in urban areas. Shift the Party strategy so that at specific points more attention is given to urban mass movements instead of the emphasis on strict adherence to People's War.

DR: What was your objective when setting up the journal *Debate: Philippine Left Review*,[7] and how did it factor in the *Reaffirm* debate?

JR: By 1991 Nathan Quimpo, Ed Dela Torre, and I put out the journal *Debate*, which was okay with the Party. We even published an article by Joma in the first issue, but the following year Joma wrote his paper *Reaffirm Our Basic Principles and Rectify Errors*.[8] In December 1991, prior to publication, there was an internal discussion over Joma's *Reaffirm*. Almost all the people at that meeting disagreed, except the few closest to Joma. Soon after, in January 1992, I left for the Philippines. When I arrived, Joma's paper hadn't officially reached the Philippines. I provided a copy to Party leaders who were in jail. I was even invited to go to a guerilla zone in March to defend my own response. But what was an open debate soon became an attack. By then, *Debate* had come out with its second or third issue, where I laid out a position that was opposed to Joma's *Reaffirm* paper. In December Joma sent a fax to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* openly attacking the people in the Mindanao-based leadership of the Party, and me.

DR: It sounds like orthodoxy wasn't important to the Party until the *Reaffirm* dispute broke out. You even say in your book that the Left does not make distinctions between communists and national democrats, except when people are forced to do so. Why not?

JR: Probably because the CPP did not emphasize strict Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought in its education. Furthermore, what drew most members of the Party to the movement was not ideology but because it was the most effective anti-Marcos organization. When I wrote my critique of the Party — subsequently published as *Breaking Through* — I remember reading the Party program for the first time. Nobody really took it seriously. That's why the stance of the NDF on any given issue probably represented the bulk of the Party's sentiment.

DR: Did people take earlier foundational documents like Joma's *Philippine Society* and *Revolution* (1968)[9] more seriously than the Party program, which was written much later?

JR: I've been thinking about Joma because he died recently. He was a member of the *old* Party (PKP). He must have been aghast at its opportunism, which is why he turned to its opposite — Maoism. The CPP would not have existed if not for the old Party. The CPP was not pro-Soviet or pro-China. It's simply because the PKP made deals with and supported Marcos. Maoism provided an ideological instrument and justification for Joma and his people moving away from the PKP, which had brilliant leaders but was exhausted.

Joma set himself up as the CPP's theoretician with three specific documents: *Philippine Society and Revolution* — after D. N. Aidit's *Indonesian Society and Revolution* (1957)[10] — *Our Urgent Tasks* (1975),[11] and *Specific Characteristics of Our People's War* (1974).[12] It's almost like, up to 1978–79, those were the main things people paid attention to. But after that there were other ideas, whereupon Joma's earlier writing ceased to be relevant. You are right to call them the foundational documents, but people thought, "the Party is set up; the foundations are laid; now let's talk about something else." Nathan Quimpo's *nom de guerre* was Marty Villalobos. It's not accidental that he called himself that, because of the Central American reference.

DR: What was the argument of *Reaffirm*?

JR: *Reaffirm* asserted the Maoist idea of the countryside surrounding the cities: armed-struggle life. But in fact, the Party had succeeded in open political struggle. It had six or seven members in the House of Representatives. They would have insisted that they're not Party organizations, but the Makabayan bloc is a collection of open organizations at a time when a lot of the underground mass organizations were decimated.[13] This was the direct opposite of the *Reaffirm* line.

DR: Its success was opposite to what the theory supposedly espoused. But wasn't the Party beholden to factors beyond its control from the beginning? In *Breaking Through* you say that Marcos's revolutionizing of Philippine society created the preconditions for the CPP's growth. I assume you mean the structural changes, as well as the political shift that Marcos represented.

JR: The most important thing that Marcos presided over and followed through on by subsequent governments was the hyper-growth of the Philippine educational system, which created the social conditions for the Party, as well as for the Philippine economy at this stage, the export of warm bodies. The Philippines does not follow a standard Marxist analysis of manufacturing creating the conditions for the proletariat, pulling labor away from the countryside. For decades, the most important development in the Philippine economy has been the growth of the third sector, the service sector. The Philippine economy, as in other Third-World countries, is plugged into the world economy.

DR: Could you then say Marcos was more revolutionary than the CPP, which merely tailed after changes in capitalist politics?

JR: No. The Party succeeded and grew because it set itself up as the main force in direct opposition to the Marcos dictatorship. By contrast, it wasn't until the later years that the elite opposition got its shit together. That the Party was underground was also the antithesis of Marcos's dictatorial methods. When Marcos fell and Cory Aquino established elite democracy, the Party had a hard time dealing with that; it was one of the reasons for its failure. In 1985–86, the New People's Army (NPA)[14] was 25,000 strong. Starting in 1986, the Party ceased to grow. From then on, it's been a steady decline. The military says it's 2,000 now — 10% percent of its peak. There are facts, there are events, there are developments internal to the Party, but the main thing is, at this point the armed struggle is at its lowest point. And then you contrast that with the Makabayan bloc of parties, that in any election gathers up to 3.5 million votes.

The other major development and problem of the Party in the late 1980s and early 90s was the anti-infiltration campaigns. Instead of dealing with it as a counter-intelligence operation, which demands secrecy, they made it a mass movement. This led to, as the Party itself finally characterized it, *kahibangan*, craziness, paranoia. Party membership is based on trust, and trust in underground conditions, in a people's war, means trusting comrades with your life. And you reverse that with the anti-infiltration campaign. You don't trust your comrades because they might be infiltrators. That's the problem.

DR: Bobby Garcia says there were limitations to the Party's notion of people's justice, that the tribunals that they set up to try the suspects were hardly impartial.[15] Do you have an analysis of what the root problem of the peoples' tribunals might have been?

JR: In my collection of articles *Impossible is Not So Easy*, I analyzed "people's justice"— it is a lot of chaff down the elementary canal.

DR: There were no first principles or a notion of impartiality?

JR: No, only "the Party above all." How can you have a people's justice system with a statement like that? If you look at the experience of people's liberation movements in Latin America, you'll find that the favored organizational form is that of the national democratic front. The party was set up in Cuba after they won. The Sandinistas in Nicaragua. By contrast, in the Philippines and in neighboring countries such as Indonesia, the form was the party. The Chinese had a role in that, and maybe also Vietnam, which influenced the movements here. In contrast to the Asian Left and the Latin American way, the Philippines has had difficulties locating itself in Asia. The cultural influence of the Latin American experience may have unconsciously influenced the Party's development.

DR: In what way?

JR: The Party did not pay attention to the NDF. And when it asserted itself, the Party cancelled the effort. But in the provinces, in Cordillera, in Mindanao, the effective organizational form was the Latin American

form; it was the front. Even today, what is the Makabayan bloc of parties except a united front?

DR: In your book you mention that the line between the Party and the united front was blurred as the cadre began building alliances through the NDF in the 1980s. There's a "dialectic of reform and revolution" — what they're doing creates new potentials and possibilities, but they can't figure out the strategy. From a Marxist perspective, were people in the NDF thinking about this problem of alliance-building potentially drawing away from the Marxist program of organizing an independent party for the working class?

JR: Certainly Joma was thinking of that. The so-called Latin Front — including Mindanao-based Party leaders like Quimpo — was a serious challenge to the Party.[16] When Joma died, the military and its supporters said the hard line in the Party was gone, and that the Party would collapse. Actually, I think there are indications that Joma wanted these talks and a negotiated political settlement. In other words he was laying the groundwork for him to come home.[17] Of course, that's not said publicly, but the fact that he's gone weakens the part of the movement that is pushing for peace, for political sentiment. And if peace can be achieved, it opens the way for a front-type organization. Too bad he's dead — it's sad. Personally, he was always fair to me except when he attacked me on the *Reaffirm* issue. But he was right; if you are going to have a Marxist-Leninist party you need control. What's sad is the conditions for a successful Marxist-Leninist party do not exist anymore.

DR: You say that the NDF's program is uncertain about economic issues, which reflects the difficulty of formulating a "national democratic alternative with the socialist perspective." You also highlight the NDF's perspective that democracy can only be achieved upon the victory of the national democratic revolution. In what sense is this a problem for the NDF and the CPP alike?

JR: I don't know if I should say the NDF had difficulty formulating economic policy. There were whole books put out by people like Noel de Dios, Butch Montes — these were professional economists who were sympathetic to the National Democrat line. They laid out a fairly sophisticated set of ideas on how to run an economy. As to the second point, the theory is that genuine democracy is possible only when you have a class structure that is not dominated by a narrow elite. Presumably included is a kind of economic reform that deprives that elite of its economic power.

DR: Did the Party believe that democracy would be possible only after the establishment of a people's republic?

JR: Yes, after the NPA defeats the Armed Forces of the Philippines. And that never happened. The Party has been on a "strategic defensive" for almost 35 years.

DR: Why couldn't the CPP just revise its strategic perspective? Why was the Party unable to think, to assess what impact its actions were having, or to learn from its mistakes? What prevented it from doing so?

JR: The Party was preoccupied with the countryside and an armed struggle. And in the meantime, the urban mass movement was building up. Reaffirm targeted the Mindanao-based Party leaders because they were the ones pushing for what Nathan Quimpo calls "combined political new theory." Joma didn't think that made sense. Having been in Holland since 1987, he wasn't chairman of the Party, but he was given two crucial tasks: ideology and peace negotiations. I suppose if Joma had agreed with Nathan, he would have won the tide.

DR: Insofar as the Party failed to define the alternative society, it was left up to the NDF to offer its own version. If the line between the NDF and CPP had become blurry, what were the consequences?

JR: Because the CPP believed that this stage of the revolution is not a socialist stage, but a national democratic stage, it lacked a more precise definition of what the national democratic society, much less a socialist society, would look like. The biggest problem was the belief that nothing significant could be achieved without the success of people's war. It's interesting that national democratic organizations like Makibaka, and for the Montañosa people, the Cordillera People's Liberation Army (CPLA), all defined what an alternative society would be, but when somebody attempted to put these together in a congress, the Party said no.[18] The congress was held, they produced a document, and Joma said "no, that's not allowed."

DR: You say that the NDF had what they called "organs of political power," which you describe as "shadow government." Does the idea of a shadow government presuppose that the function of the government is not debate or public reason?

JR: The idea of a shadow government comes about under conditions of warfare. My understanding of the theory is you organize in small groups, and then when you've reached a level of organization in the *barrio* such that you've won the support of the people, that's when you set up a shadow government. But a shadow government is a tactic; it's a way of winning support under conditions of warfare.

DR: In *The Class Struggles in France* (1850), Marx says revolutions in the periphery can't put into question bourgeois life conditions but can only touch upon their conditions. In other words, revolutions must happen in the core capitalist countries. Did anyone in the Philippines see the failure of the Left as having to do with the limited national scope and perspective of the Party?

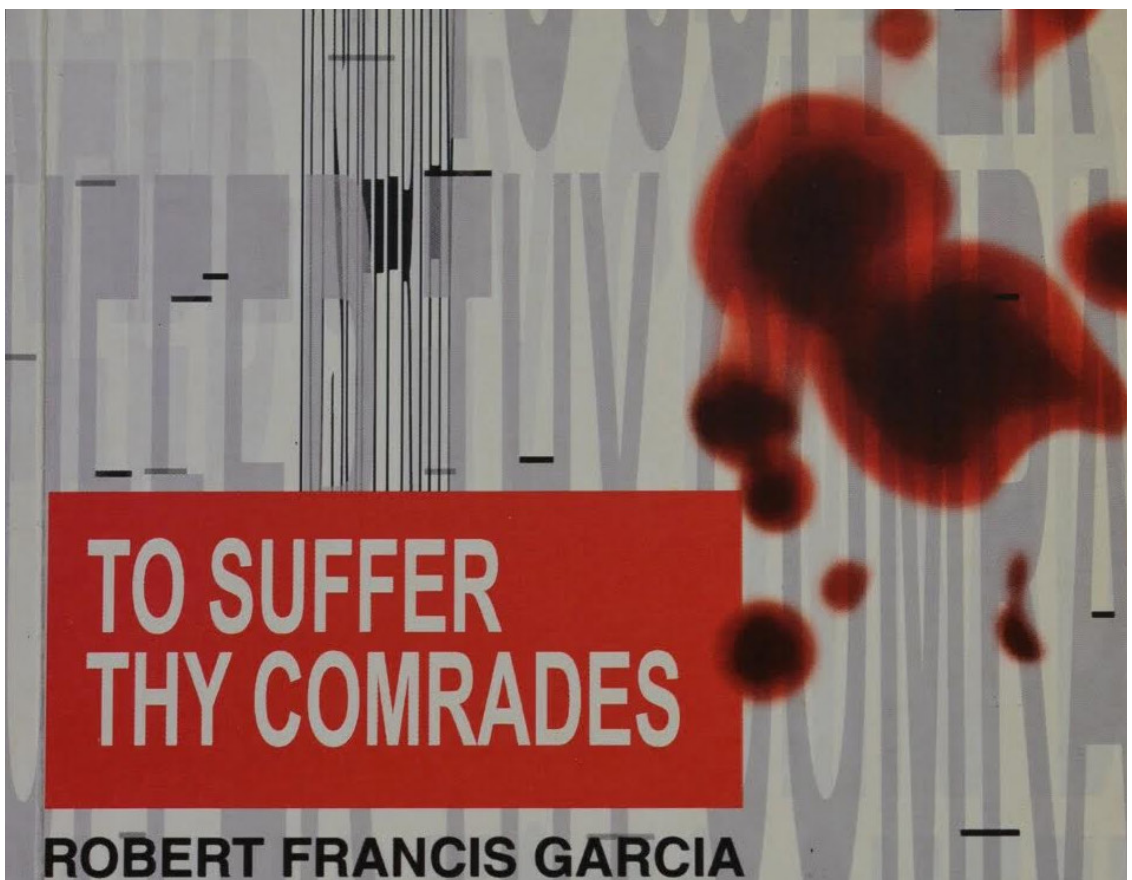
JR: No. The successes of the Party in Samar, Mindanao, and Negros Island led them to think that it was national in scope. And the scope of political action, the organizational work, was also national.

DR: How can the revolution be under the leadership of the proletariat if what the party identifies as the proletariat does not advocate socialism, internationally, according to Marx?

JR: Come on — you are raising details. For Maoism, the party is based on the alliance of the peasant and the proletariat. That's why the program is a national program. In reality, the Party depended on fictions. One of the fictions was that the proletariat determined policies of the Party. There was no such proletariat — it was petit-bourgeois, like Joma. In fact, most of the other leaders of the Party were also bourgeois. They considered themselves Maoist not only because they wanted the support of the Chinese government, but because the Chinese Revolution faced the same problem — to have a proletarian party determine policy in a society that is not proletarianized.

DR: Why did the CPP see the elections as an illusion of democracy?

JR: Because elections are dominated by the oligarchy, because money-politics controls elections. But that doesn't mean that you boycott those elections — as the Party discovered to its dismay. Elections offer avenues of reform. Unfortunately the Right-wing populists have been better at occupying those spaces.



Cover of Garcia, *To Suffer Thy Comrades* (2001)

Photograph by Rick Rocamora (ca. 1980), in H. C. Toribio, "We Are Revolution: A Reflective History of the Union of Democratic Filipinos (KDP)," *Amerasia Journal* 24, no. 2 (1998): 160.

DR: You contrast the Party's people's-war approach towards national democracy with creating "popular institutions of control and organizations of popular initiative and will," which strengthen civil society. Is the safeguarding of civil society alone an adequate program for the Left?

JR: The Party did not have a concept of civil society because the idea of civil society conjures images of popular organizations that are independent from parties and have the capacities to act independently. The Party did not recognize the relevance of organizations outside of its control.

DR: Couldn't a party with voluntary membership be considered a civil-society organization? Wouldn't it be outside the sphere of the state?

JR: No. The idea of civil society is outside of the state. Civil society's institutions have political power of action to influence the state, but are outside of the state's control. The Party is not outside the sphere of the state because it wants to control the state. Whereas civil society does not want to control the state; it wants to be independent and to influence what the state does.

DR: Does the Maoist preoccupation with inequality and hierarchy express a suspicion of intellectuals, that they might hold within themselves the germ of reproducing capitalism under conditions of socialist construction?

JR: I'm not sure that one could say the Party did not trust intellectuals, because from the 1970s through the first half of the 80s the relevant intellectuals were National Democrats, including — although one would think not — economists. In my case, I didn't feel like I was mistrusted. I didn't get promoted to full membership, but nobody ever raised the issue.

DR: Some, like Jojo Abinales, have compared the Party to the Church. Why?

JR: The Communist Party came up with rules on courtship and marriage. It hewed closely to the Catholic Church on these things; the Party was pretty much like a religious order. When you joined, you were deprived of a future, a career, a family — being a member was like being a Franciscan monk, only you didn't wear a habit. Premarital or extramarital sex was prohibited, the attitude towards women was backwards. But it advanced women's liberation in that women could initiate divorce, and courtship. That's as far as it went.

DR: Towards the end of *Breaking Through* you suggest that a progressive movement can prevent leaders from resorting to autocratic government. But isn't a strong state needed to ensure, as Paul Hutchcroft, following Max Weber, argued, the rationalization of the state for capitalism to function?

JR: No. I still believe that we need a strong state that is capable of not being manipulated by the oligarchy. The only way that can exist is a social democratic government that has the backing of society and works against the control of the oligarchy. While it is crucial for the Party to fight against autocracy, it is also crucial for it to work for social reform, which will take away the oligarchy's power, or at least chip away at it. Things like land reform, etc.

DR: You write how on the one hand, economic justice is required to change undemocratic power relations. On the other hand, democracy itself reflects the reality where there is no such equality. This seems to describe the paradox of democracy: power is needed to pursue a redistributionist program, yet the anti-Marcos united front under Cory Aquino became internally divided between the popular organizations and the elite families. Why was it expected that a redistributionist program could be carried out against the wishes of the coalition, as it were?

JR: Cory initially made concessions to the Party in her appointments to the cabinet in lower positions, but they didn't last long. The Party caved and did a critique of the boycott strategy, agreeing to "critical collaboration" with the Cory Aquino government, but that ended quickly, after not even a year.

Any kind of redistributive justice would have to start with land reform. I don't know if Cory knew it, but even before she decided to leave it to the House of Representatives, the whole idea of land reform was destroyed with the Mendiola Massacre.[19] The people who were killed there were peasants. The coup attempts against Cory failed, but they succeeded in reversing the thrust of the government in opposing land reform, as well as the Party. In the second Aquino cabinet, under Cory's son Nonoy, I remember a discussion about land reform.[20] Nonoy was hoping for something that would enable the Aquino-Cojuangco families to retain their Hacienda Luisita in some form.[21] And I must give it to him that he changed his mind because the whole Akbayan[22] leadership told him that was not possible, and the man he appointed as secretary of the Department of Agrarian Reform, Gil de los Reyes, also told him that.

DR: In your book you talk about the stagnation and decline of the Party under Cory Aquino and you bring up the popular democrats who say the Party got anti-fascism wrong; the theory didn't conform to the new historical development of fascism. How is repurposing anti-fascism a more timely framework than the Maoist anti-fascism, which would date back to the 1930s Popular Front?

JR: The pop-dems represented the open form of united-front politics. They wanted to persuade the Party to use that form, but they failed and were kicked out. Ironically, the pop-dem idea of the united front has taken shape in the Makabayan bloc.

DR: Were the pop-dems working with the Aquino administration at all?

JR: They weren't, because Ed Dela Torre was in Europe, and Boy Morales was busy with the Rural Reconstruction Movement. They went into the government in a big way under Joseph Estrada — he used Morales and Dela Torre to build his campaign machinery, which got him elected.

DR: I assume that they then completely disavowed their former idea of anti-fascism? If they're working directly with the President, how could they be engaged in anti-fascist politics?

JR: They didn't ask themselves that question.

DR: In closing: according to Dodong Nemenzo, the only contribution that Filipino Marxists made was in the field of military tactics. Is this fair?

JR: That's not fair. Joma's foundational documents are a contribution, and so are the criticisms. Nathan Quimpo's contributions are also significant. **|P**

Transcribed by Michael McClelland and Daniel Rudin

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[1] Joel Rocamora, *Breaking Through: The Struggle Within the Communist Party of the Philippines* (Pasig City: Anvil, 1994).

[2] Both published by Bughaw in Quezon City.

[3] The Communist Party of the Philippines (Partido Kommunista ng Pilipinas) split in 1968 from the party of the same name, Partido Kommunista ng Pilipinas, which was founded in 1930, and which now distinguishes itself by adding the "-1930" suffix to its name. We will abbreviate the party founded in 1930 as "PKP," and the party formed in 1968 as "CPP."

[4] Joma Sison (the nickname for Jose Maria Sison) was the founder of the CPP.

[5] Known as the Union of Democratic Filipinos in English, it was active in the U.S. from 1973 to 86, not to be confused with the similarly named Katipunan ng Demokratikong Pilipino, which is a nationalist party in the Philippines, founded in 2018.

[6] See also Daniel Rudin, "Deep underground in the Phillippines: An interview with Nathan Quimpo," *Platypus Review* 147 (June 2022), <https://platypus1917.org/2022/05/31/deep-underground-in-the-philippines-an-interview-with-nathan-quimpo/>.

[7] The journal has since been digitized at <https://twsc.upd.edu.ph/debate-philippine-left-review/>.

[8] Armando Liwanag (Jose Maria Sison), *Reaffirm Our Basic Principles and Carry the Revolution Forward* (1991), <https://www.marxists.org/history/philippines/cpp/liwanag/1991/reaffirm.htm>.

[9] Amado Guerrero (Jose Maria Sison), *Philippine Society and Revolution* (1968), <https://www.marxists.org/history/philippines/cpp/guerrero/1970/psr.htm>.

[10] D. N. Aidit, *Indonesian Society and Revolution* (Basic Problems of the Indonesian Revolution) (1957), <https://www.marxists.org/history/indonesia/1957-IndonesianSociety.htm>.

[11] Amado Guerrero (Jose Maria Sison), *Our Urgent Tasks* (1975), <https://www.marxists.org/history/philippines/cpp/guerrero/1975/urgent-tasks.htm>.

[12] Simoun Riple (Jose Maria Sison), *Specific Characteristics of Our People's War* (1974), <https://www.marxists.org/history/philippines/cpp/riple/1975/specific-characteristics.htm>.

[13] Makabayan is a block of Left parties asserting the CPP's Maoist line.

[14] The NPA is the armed wing of the CPP.

[15] See Robert Francis B. Garcia, *To Suffer Thy Comrades: How the Revolution Decimated its Own* (Pasig City: Anvil, 2001), <https://libcom.org/article/suffer-thy-comrades-how-revolution-decimated-its-own-robert-francis-b-garcia>.

[16] By "Latin Front," Rocamora means the Latin American conception of the united front, such as in Nicaragua, wherein civil-society organizations worked alongside the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), rather than directly under its control.

[17] Sison had been living in exile in the Netherlands since 1987.

[18] The CPLA was an organization set up by the people in the North, the Igarots, while Makibaka was a women's organization.

[19] The Mendiola Massacre occurred during a 1987 farmers' protest in which 13 were killed. It is usually seen as the end of efforts to reform the Aquino administration in a progressive direction.

[20] Rocamora here refers to the administration of Nonoy Aquino (Cory Aquino's son), from 2012 to 2016, where he served as the Secretary of the National Anti-Poverty Commission.

[21] The Hacienda Luisita is a large sugar plantation in the province of Tarlac. It was acquired by the family of José Cojuangco in the 1950s.

[22] Akbayan is a progressive, non-Maoist party that typically votes with the Liberal Party.

The end(s) of abstinence

Ethan Kaimana

ZOOMERS ARE NOT having sex. Sexual activity among young people is lower than ever.[1] The expansion of online hook-up and dating apps has not changed this trend. While around 50% of 18- to 29-year-olds reported using dating apps in 2020,[2] Generation Z seems poised to continue the decline of sexual activity since the mid-20th century. Really, this extends to all social activity: we drink less, go out less, transgress less, and socialize less than our parents and grandparents.

Why are we abstinent? Why do we fear love and its consummate expression? Popular consensus draws up external factors: the isolation of the COVID pandemic, fears of encroaching climate change, financial instability, an interest in "discovering" and "developing" one's sexual identity, and so on. These answers are not as comprehensive as they might seem. None are isolated from social transformation; all are phenomena of a fundamental change in our desire to love and to be loved. Cultural cynicism, evident in the anxiety (or desire) for impending doom, smears and confuses the expression of love as a bourgeois social relation. Love is no longer recognized as a mutual transaction: Kant's "mutual self-possession of each other's sexual capacities." The over-categorization of sexual expression — predator and prey, sexual and asexual — is much more pessimistic, avoiding the freedom of sexuality in favor of setting its limits.

Young people today are expected to pin down their desires through strict self-management. They police themselves, and each other, for "problematic" behavior, placating questions of desire with a fear of punishment. The inappropriate expression of desire, or the problem per se, is defined by one's sexual identity. This is thought of as both immutable and inherently political, comradely and barren.

As sexuality becomes desexualized, as the personal becomes political, the impossibility of both sexuality and politics bears down on us. Asexuality presents itself not just as a permanent sexual category, but an expectation in our culture. In the half-decade leading up to the COVID pandemic, it seemed as though we could no longer bear seeing naked bodies on camera: while sex has returned to film, it is neutered and self-conscious. Filmmakers force bodies against each other like naked, smooth Barbies, trapped in the sub-erotic. Trauma abounds. Touch cannot be depicted.

A childishness underlies all contemporary treatment of sexuality. This is pre-Oedipal, trapped within an incomplete self, staring in the mirror. Zoomers are fixated on precisely defining the distinction between child and adult because they fear the fact that one cannot *become either*.[3] We endlessly trace the pinpoint, searching for the hidden child-lover in all of us. The rabbit hole runs deep. A 22-year-old is beaten by a mob for meeting an 18-year-old.[4]

As sexuality and politics grow further out of reach, only violence presents itself as a meaningful alternative. We are expected to annihilate ourselves. Even suicide must be political: after all, if all else has failed, then something must be done. "Martyrdom" — whether through self-immolation or prolonged court proceedings — is a submission to death, a rejection of the possibility of becoming. We have not even given ourselves the chance to love, let alone live.

How then, can the authoritarian nihilism of contemporary sexuality be overcome? Sexual conservatism might seem obvious. That too, dodges the question of history. Our sexual unfreedom is the fulfillment of the (post-?)Fordist "healthy sex life." Adorno called this "sexuality disarmed as sex."[5] For Marxists like Adorno, sexuality was not merely degeneracy — not just badness or goodness — but an expression of freedom unfulfilled. Sex and love constantly transform alongside society itself. The emancipation of labor, as championed by the Bourgeois Revolution, was intrinsically tied to the free pursuit of happiness. Love is part and parcel here: not a necessity, but something we are compelled to do while seeking our happiness. Society has already broken down the barriers surrounding sexuality or at least points toward their overcoming. As Thomas Cannon wrote in *Ancient and Modern Pederasty Investigated and Exemplify'd* (1749), the English language's earliest published defense of modern homosexual behavior, "Unnatural desire is a contradiction in terms, downright nonsense. Desire is an amatory impulse of the inmost human parts: are not they, however constructed and consequently impelling, nature?"[6]

To understand the significance of this today, we must first understand how it presented itself historically. We must clear away taboos surrounding the history of sexuality. Most importantly, we must deconstruct what John D'Emilio called the "myth of the eternal homosexual"[7]: the idea that any sexual identity is as it has always been. Sexual identity as a natural, biological state is really an evacuation of society; contemporary identification with the gendered castes and regimented sexuality of the ancient world points toward this. Marxism laid the groundwork for this vulgar satisfaction by abandoning the idea of sexual expression as malleable and social.

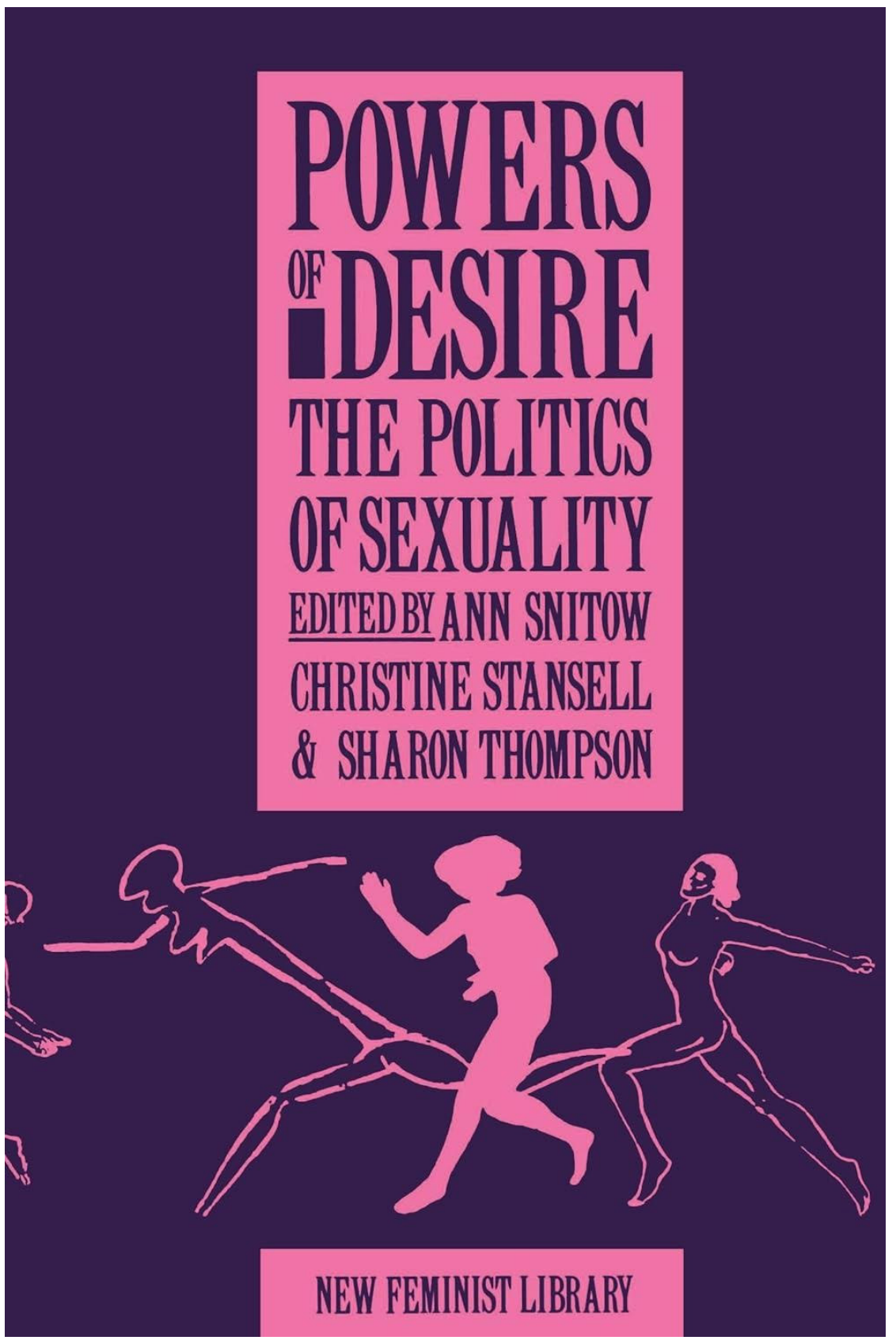
Modern sexual repression came into being alongside the development of the Bonapartist state. These laws, developed, structured, and enforced alongside the burgeoning crisis of society, defined homosexual behavior as deviant, antisocial, or an expression of mental illness. Before the mid-19th century, sodomy laws in the United States were largely unenforced: similarly, after the 1828 repeal of the 16th-century Buggery Act, homosexual activity in Victorian Britain was in legal limbo. In Britain, the 1885 Labouchere Amendment expanded the prohibition of anal intercourse to general gross indecency, threatening life imprisonment for crossdressers and men engaged in homosexual acts. In Germany, the center of the Second International, the Bismarckian state replaced and strengthened prohibitions against sodomy and crossdressing with Paragraphs 175, 360/11, and 183.

With the decline of liberal revolutions and the consolidation of the state as society's crisis manager, liberals themselves frequently advocated for the intrusion of the state into private life. Henry Labouchere, the British amendment's namesake and one of the pre-eminent British liberals of his day, incorporated his dogged combat against social deviance into muckraking reform and an opposition to Victorian imperialism. Marxism, then, initially defended sexual expression after it had been abandoned by liberalism: it pushed for the completion of the revolution.

Under this context, Marxists strongly opposed the deviancy laws that regulated sexuality. In Germany, socialists like sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld organized institutions like the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, the Institute for Sexual Research, and the World League for Sexual Reform, fighting for the legalization of sodomy, prostitution, and crossdressing.

Through these institutions (and his work with the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)), Hirschfeld defined the terms "homosexual," "transvestite," and "transsexual" — not as identities, but as political categories. Each represented an activity that his patients were barred from carrying out as outlined in German law. Paragraph 175, which criminalized "unnatural sex acts between persons of male sex,"[8] prevented the free expression of the "homosexual," who finds a love object of the same sex. Paragraphs 360/11[9] and 183[10] penalized public crossdressing as "gross mischief" or a "public nuisance," corresponding with Hirschfeld's definitions of "transvestite" and "transsexual." "Transsexual" was further defined by the usage of unregulated medical procedures to appear as the opposite sex.

Germaine Krull, "Mains de Pol Rab" (1929)



Cover of *Powers of Desire* (1983)

Hirschfeld struggled to clear these barriers: the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee put forward petitions to the Reichstag in 1898, 1922, and 1925 to repeal Paragraph 175. These earned the support of Karl Kautsky, August Bebel, and many other orthodox Marxists. Hirschfeld and his comrades worked on both the national and municipal level, negotiating with nearly every level of the German government.

This, as with many other issues in the early 20th century, raised the question of the relationship of reform and the preparation for political revolution. Marxists agreed that the discontent with these laws (as with many others) embodied the emerging crisis of the relationship of the state to society — discontent with the dominance of the state. Reform itself came to demonstrate the limits of its potential in a society wracked with contradiction. Only political revolution, then, could overcome and fulfill the possibilities of freedom.

What was the party's role? Lenin saw it as a mediating tool for the wider socialist movement, allowing for political education through self-reflection on socialist activity and its relationship to revolution. Rosa Luxemburg argued that the advancement of capitalism created endless potential for new crises. The party, then, connected reform with the "necessity, possibility, and desirability"[11] of revolution.

However, this relationship also came into crisis, and with it, Marxism and its relationship to sexual liberation. The growth and entrenchment of international socialism precipitated divisions within the Marxist movement over the form and possibility of revolution.

Following World War I, the SPD, once self-consciously separate from society, took up its leadership and eventually controlled the German government. With this, the Party abandoned the Revolution, managing the crisis of Germany (and of society) with an iron fist. In the same year that the SPD crushed the Spartacist uprising, it championed Hirschfeld's newly-founded Institute for Sexual Research as an integral part of the new state bureaucracy. The Institute codified sexual transition procedures and lobbied to alter municipal codes, equating the recognition of these groups as full citizens with complete liberation. Hirschfeld defended these reforms on the basis that these conditions were biological and natural — explanations which were later seized upon during Nazi Germany's recriminalization of homosexuality and alternative gender expression.

The early Soviet Union, by contrast, merely abolished tsarist punishments for sodomy and crossdressing. Rather than actively intervening, they opened the door to the free expression and discovery of sexuality in private life. When sexuality or gender presented itself as a political problem — the legality of marriage, the lawfulness of sex-change operations, etc. — these were decided case-by-case, with a convening of medical and juridical expertise. In 1922, a female-to-male transsexual named Evgenii Fedorovich had his marriage to a woman declared legal by a Soviet Court. While not a definitive decision, the Expert Medical Counsel of the Health Commissariat expected the future clarification of their rights.[12]

The breakdown of this early openness reflects a regression in the Soviet Union's ambitions — and, by extension, the regression of Marxism itself. The failure of international socialist revolution brought the role of Soviet governance into crisis. Stalinism (and by extension the Soviet state's sexual policies) was a response to this. As the party integrated itself into the state, its politics came to represent bottom-up demands — an aspect of the stabilization of the Soviet state, concessionary in the same sense as the SPD. The recriminalization of homosexuality, the banning of sex-reassignment surgery, and the adoption of a stance against "bourgeois decadence" as state policy were all aspects of Stalinization. These were products of a revolution unfulfilled.

The Left has not progressed beyond sexual politics as the regulation of private life: the fact that the history of sexual expression seems so obscure is only another symptom of this process. The Left today projects pastiches of Stonewall or Combahee onto the entire history of human sexuality. Demands for sexual freedom were not awakened by a single riot or group of intellectuals — they are an integral aspect of society. There can be no sexual freedom in an unfree society, nor can society be freed without political organization. The party, historically, allowed us to critically reflect on the history of sexual liberation: in its absence, its possibilities have only become less clear.

Today, the contemporary Left pursues sexual liberation as resistance — resisting gender, resisting heterosexuality, resisting "woke" sexuality, etc. This resistance is little more than identification with those same concepts — or, worse, an inversion of them, pinging between libertinism and puritanism without digesting their meaning. This amounts to little more than influencing policy, expanding and integrating into the Democratic Party. We must remember that the point is not merely to resist the world, but to change it. **|P**

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[1] Scott South and Lei Lei, "Why are Fewer Young Adults Having Casual Sex?," *Socius* 7 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023121996854>.

[2] Monica Anderson, Emily Vogels, Erica Turner, "The Virtues and Downsides of Online Dating," *Pew Research Center* (February 6, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/02/06/the-virtues-and-downsides-of-online-dating/>.

[3] Children should not raise children, and yet they do anyway.

[4] Tim Stelloh and David Douglas, "'Mob' of college students attack man in TikTok-inspired trap, police say," *NBC News* (January 6, 2025), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/6-arrested-man-was-lured-campus-beaten-tiktok-inspired-attack-police-s-rcna186502>.

[5] Theodor Adorno, "Sexual Taboos and the Law Today," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 73.

[6] Thomas Cannon, *Ancient and Modern Pederasty Investigated and Exemplify'd* (1749), in *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England: A Sourcebook*, ed. Rictor Norton (2017), <http://www.rictornorton.co.uk/eighteen/1749cann.htm>.

[7] John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, et al. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 101.

[8] "§175 StGB: Strafgesetzbuch für das Deutsche Reich vom 15. Mai 1871" (1871), <https://lexetius.com/StGB/175,7>.

[9] "§360 StGB: Strafgesetzbuch für das Deutsche Reich vom 10 Dezember 1919" (1919), <https://lexetius.com/StGB/360,9>.

[10] "§183 StGB: Strafgesetzbuch für das Deutsche Reich vom 20. März 1876" (1876), <https://lexetius.com/StGB/183,7>.

[11] See Chris Cutrone, "1917," in Benjamin Blumberg, Chris Cutrone, Atiya Khan, Spencer A. Leonard, and Richard Rubin, "The decline of the Left in the 20th century: Toward a theory of historical regression," *Platypus Review* 17 (November 2009) <https://platypus1917.org/2009/11/18/the-decline-of-the-left-in-the-20th-century-1917/>.

[12] Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 169–70.